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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000490

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: NEW COALITION CO-CHAIRS ON OPPOSITION, POLITICAL PRISONERS

REF: A. MINSK 453  
[1](#)B. MINSK 438  
[1](#)C. MINSK 458  
[1](#)D. MINSK 440  
[1](#)E. MINSK 457

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) The new co-chairs of the opposition coalition outlined for Ambassador their plans through the fall. The co-chairs will each take responsibility for a segment of the coalition's work but leave the door open for former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich to become a fifth co-chair with a portfolio covering street actions and/or international affairs. The opposition leaders asked the USG to continue pushing for the release of political prisoners. Securing their freedom could further encourage the coalition to increase its activity in the months to come.  
End summary.

Must See Results to Judge Congress a Success

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[1](#)2. (C) On June 7, Ambassador met with newly elected United Democratic Forces (UDF) Co-Chairs Anatoliy Lebedko, Anatoliy Levkovich, and Vintsuk Vyachorka. Yelena Skrigina sat in for the ill co-chair Sergey Kalyakin. All assessed the UDF congress (ref A) favorably, and Vyachorka thanked the USG for intervening with the GOB to make the event possible. Skrigina agreed and added that U.S. pressure allowed the Communists to hold their party congress as well (ref B).

[1](#)3. (C) While joining in Vyachorka and Skrigina's sentiments, both Lebedko and Levkovich emphasized the key was to move from talk to action. Lebedko outlined a series of events planned for the coming months. Initially, opposition leaders will meet in Vilnius June 13 to discuss putting the strategy approved at the congress into action. They will hold further meetings with government officials in Moscow on June 18, Germany on June 25-28 and Ukraine on July 5-9 to explain the strategy to international partners. Domestic actions include a September 30 march against cuts to social spending (ref C), and on October 21 action supporting the EU's 12 conditions for negotiations. Street "performances" on July 27 would advertise the events in the fall.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Each co-chair holds a portfolio in order to promote accountability for implementation. Lebedko will head up efforts to develop a message to portray the opposition as a positive alternative to Lukashenko. Levkovich will focus on the 2008 parliamentary election campaign. Vyachorka will head up public relations and international relations.

Working with the regions falls to Kalyakin. He will also cultivate contacts with the nomenklatura, an activity the coalition will of course not publicize.

#### Keeping the Door Open for Milinkevich

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15. (C) Vyachorka told Ambassador that Milinkevich's domestic and international recognition could provide a huge resource for a united opposition. However, the former presidential candidate's underestimation of the role of political parties made it uncertain whether he would work within the coalition.

Lebedko said Milinkevich could still become a co-chair with responsibility for street actions or international affairs. He feared Milinkevich would opt for his "For Freedom" movement to participate separately from the UDF in next year's elections. Lebedko stated categorically that "it should not be allowed" and said such an action could, if indirectly supported by international donors, split the opposition. (Note: Political party leaders fault some international NGOs, including the National Endowment for Democracy, with channeling their support to Belarusian NGOs seen as closely tied to Milinkevich. End note.)

#### Hope for the Release of More Political Prisoners?

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16. (C) Vyachorka praised the clear USG message to Belarusian authorities, which he credited for the release of political prisoners (ref D) and relatively light fines for several Malady Front activists convicted on political motivated charges (ref E). While he noted the need for wide-ranging reforms, Vyachorka said political prisoners were the top priority for the moment. He and Skrigina said the United

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States should push further, although it might be realistic to hope for the release of just two or three more persons. Lebedko added prisoner of conscience Andrey Klimov's (ref E) health was failing.

#### Comment: An Active Opposition without an Election?

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17. (C) Organized opposition to Lukashenko in the past has frequently gone into hibernation after elections. As the co-chairs admit, it remains very early to tell whether the consensus reached at the congress will allow the opposition to overcome this tendency. We are encouraged that the UDF leaders seem generally optimistic about their potential to cooperate and convert words into deeds. Convincing Milinkevich to act as a team player, and pushing to GOB to release opposition heavyweights would certainly fuel the optimism.

Stewart